

DELTA/CALFED

Three options up for consideration
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By Dennis Oliver

The contentious political bickering that has driven California water policy for 150 years is either about to end in a peace accord or explode into full-scale fighting.

Setting the stage Monday, state and federal officials unveiled three final alternatives to restore the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta from decades of decline caused by over-zealous water diversions to cities and farms.

Among the three proposals to save the fragile Delta -- the source of 80 percent of California's drinking water -- is one that includes the core of a mammoth project voters rejected 16 years ago: the Peripheral Canal.

That option calls for a canal that is 42 miles long between Hood and the Clifton Forebay southwest of Byron, where giant pumps send Delta water south. The path is the same as the \$1.3 billion Peripheral Canal, a concrete-lined ditch as wide as

a 12-lane freeway, rejected by voters in 1982. Northern California voters overwhelmingly opposed the canal, fearing a water grab by the south.

A decision is expected by late summer after a series of public hearings around the state. Necessary paperwork is could push the approval timetable to year's end.

Since 1994, representatives of government agencies, urban water companies, the agriculture industry and environmental groups have been trying to hammer out a Delta "fix" aimed at balancing human water needs with those of the environment.

The final options were announced by CALFED, a federal-state partnership agency created to oversee long-term solutions for the Delta with what has been a four-year marathon of technical studies, workshops, public hearings, and political posturing. In addition to the canal idea, new reservoirs and enhancement to existing channels also are in the mix of options.

The underlying idea is to spend up to \$10.5 billion to keep fish swimming and spawning happily while at the same time watering Central Valley farms and keeping taps running in the urban centers. Some 22 million people get their drinking water from the Delta, and the farm industry that depends on the water is valued \$24 billion annually.

The question of how to do that, however, could spawn a new era of building canals and dams -- and arguing over whether more water from the north should be should be shipped south, home to 75 per cent of the state's approximate 33 million

residents.

"This might force people to sit down and bargain reasonably, or it might ignite the water wars again," said Bill Jennings, who heads the Delta Keeper program, which monitors water quality and pollution at the center of the state. "Usually, when it comes down to people versus fish, the fish are going to lose."

Dan Macon, head of the California Farm Water Coalition, said expanding water storage is critical -- a contention environmentalists are gearing up to assault.

"We've got to find some way to increase the size of the pie we divide up," Macon said.

"There's going to be a certain amount of political posturing over this now that (the options) have been made public."

Environmentalists already are calling the canal alternative "Son of the Peripheral Canal."

Government officials insist there is no Southern California conspiracy involved, that they're simply trying to make modest improvements to the water distribution system to accommodate people and fish.